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ABSTRACT

This report describes a program for improving the reading skills of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) students. The targeted population consists of 19 ESL students, ranging in age from 7-10 years, in a western suburb of a large metropolitan city in Illinois. The problem of poor reading ability was documented through low reading scores on the STAR Computer Adaptive Reading Test and through minimal classroom participation documented in a classroom participation checklist. Analysis of probable cause revealed that several factors impeded students' reading progress. Nonexistent, or inconsistent, education in native language; limited life experiences; lack of prior knowledge; and poor vocabulary all contributed to the slow acquisition of reading skills. These factors produced low self-confidence in students. A review of solution strategies, combined with an analysis of the problem setting, resulted in the selection of an intensive vocabulary-building program. This vocabulary-building program included the use of small group vocabulary instruction, computerized vocabulary programs, vocabulary software, vocabulary based games, and mini vocabulary dictionaries. Post-intervention data indicated an increase in the students' reading ability and an increase in classroom participation. (Contains 40 references and 7 tables.) (Author/SM)

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# IMPROVING READING SKILLS IN ESL STUDENTS THROUGH AN INTENSIVE VOCABULARY BUILDING PROGRAM

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An Action Research Project Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the

School of Education in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of Masters in Teaching and Leadership

Saint Xavier University & Pearson Skylight

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## ABSTRACT

This report describes a program for improving the reading skills of ESL (English as a Second Language) students. The targeted population consists of nineteen ESL students, ranging in age from 7 to 10 years, in a western suburb of a large metropolitan city located in Illinois. The problem of poor reading ability is documented through low reading scores on the STAR Computer Adaptive Reading Test and through minimal classroom participation documented in a classroom participation checklist.

Analysis of probable cause data revealed that several factors impeded students' reading progress. Nonexistent, or inconsistent, education in native language, limited life experiences, lack of prior knowledge, and poor vocabulary all contributed to the slow acquisition of reading skills. These factors produced low self-confidence in students.

A review of solution strategies, combined with an analysis of the problem setting, resulted in the selection of an intensive vocabulary-building program. This vocabulary-building program included the use of small group vocabulary instruction, computerized vocabulary programs, vocabulary software, vocabulary based games, and mini vocabulary dictionaries.

Post intervention data indicated an increase in the students' reading ability and an increase in classroom participation.

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# CHAPTER I

## PROBLEM STATEMENT AND CONTEXT

### General Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this action research project is to investigate the effect of an intensive vocabulary-building program on improving reading skills with English as a Second Language (ESL) students. The students of the targeted multi-age ESL class exhibit poor English reading skills. Evidence for the existence of poor English reading skills is documented through scores on the STAR Computer Adaptive Reading Test.

The target class is similar to a "Welcome Center", designed to meet the needs of new immigrants to the district. The class consists of nineteen ESL students ranging from 2nd grade through 5th grade. All students have been in the United States for less than one year. The class is 58% male. The racial composition of the class is 100% Hispanic.

### Immediate Problem Context

The target class is located in a school district that serves a western suburb of a large metropolitan city. There are four elementary schools and one middle school in the district. Although the target class serves students in grades 2nd through 5th, it is located in the middle school. The location was determined based on two factors. First, space limitations at the four elementary schools prevented the class from being located in a

suitable classroom within an elementary building. Second, the target class serves the entire school district, as does the middle school. Therefore, transportation is more efficient with the class being housed at the middle school. Although the target class operates independently of the middle school, it is important to be aware of the statistics related to the middle school population.

The middle school has a total enrollment of 713 students. Approximately 44% of the middle school students are Caucasian, 4.1% are African American, 44.3% are Hispanic, 7.4% are Asian/Pacific Islander, and 0.1% are Native American. Eight percent of the middle school students are low-income[1] and 10.4% are limited-English proficient[2]. The mobility rate is 18.5%, the chronic truancy rate is 0.3%, and the attendance rate is 95.3%. The average class size is 22.2 in grade six and 20.8 in grade eight (Illinois State Board of Education, 2001).

Students in the target class may participate in, if they so choose, a one-hour after school program that is designed to provide additional English instruction and to assist with homework. The program is free to the students but requires parental permission. Parents of students in the target class can themselves register for a free introductory ESL class that meets once a week in the evening. The purpose of the adult ESL class is to teach parents basic English skills that will help them to share in the learning experiences of their children as well as facilitate a rapid integration into the community.

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[1] Low-income students come from families receiving public aid, live in institutions for neglected children, are supported in foster homes with public funds, or are eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunches.
[2] Limited-English proficient students are those eligible for transitional bilingual programs.

## The Surrounding Community

The community that the school district serves began its history as a dairy farm community. It became established in 1884 in response to the need for a local school system. Presently, it is one of the ten largest industrial communities in the state. In 1988, an intergovernmental group was formed. This group consists of the elementary school district, the high school district, the park district, the public library, and the village. The purpose of the group is to develop and implement long-range planning to benefit residents of the community. The group meets on a regular basis to express common concerns, solve problems, and to share visions for the future. The community is located along a vital transportation network that links the metropolitan area to the surrounding suburbs. This includes being only minutes away from a major airport (Community Profile Network, 2002).

The community is mostly blue collar, however the demographics have been changing in recent years due to the demolition of many older homes and the construction of large, quite expensive, single-family residences. The median household income is $67,821, which falls in the 87$^{th}$ percentile of state income ranking. Thirty-seven percent of the community is Hispanic, 52.2% are Caucasian with the remaining 10.8% being composed of African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, and American Indian. The median age in the community is 32.2 years. Thirty-seven percent of households have children less than 18 years of age. The average household size is 2.95. The total population of the community is 20,703 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001).

At present, the community is grappling with the possibility of airport expansion, which would significantly impact the operation of the local school district. There is currently a

proposal to dramatically expand the airport, which would involve the possible destruction of up to 1500 residences in the community. This would have a major impact on attendance in the school district.

The school district has a total enrollment of 2,264 students. This reflects a 17% increase in enrollment over the last ten years. Approximately 38% of the district's students are Caucasian, 3% are African American, 51.3% are Hispanic, and 7.8% are Asian/Pacific Islander. Eight percent of the district's students are low-income and 17.4% are limited-English proficient. The mobility rate is 20.6%, the chronic truancy rate is 0.1%, and the attendance rate is 94.7%.

The district employs 129 full-time teachers. Approximately 98% are Caucasian while 1.6% are Hispanic. The average number of teaching years is 13.3 with 46.6% of teachers possessing a Master's degree or beyond. Eighty-six percent of teachers are female. The average teacher's salary is $46,592, which is below the state average of $47,914. The average administrator's salary is $97,914, which is above the state average of $84,273. The average class size in the district is 22.2 while the pupil to teacher ratio is 20.1:1 (Illinois State Board of Education, 2001).

## National Context of the Problem

ESL instructional methods have been at the forefront of educational, and political, debate in recent years. While many methodologies have been examined and re-examined, it appears that the importance of vocabulary development when acquiring reading skills in ESL students has been long overlooked. Vocabulary-building, though supported by limited evidence, is one of many potentially critical components of instruction for English language learners (Gersten & Baker, 2000). Vocabulary learning

may play a major role in successful programs for English-language learners. A student cannot get meaning from a passage if the student is not familiar with the vocabulary used. Some researchers have examined the effect of vocabulary anchors used to build conceptual connections with young readers (Anonymous, 2001). Vocabulary anchors represent graphic teaching strategies designed to help learners build the conceptual connections they need to understand informational text. When students are not equipped with a vast vocabulary, they are forced to refer to external sources, such as a dictionary or translator, in an attempt to derive meaning from a passage. This can become an all-consuming proposition that can frustrate students into simply ignoring many vocabulary words. Gonzalez (1999) conducted two studies related to the effectiveness of dictionary usage and concluded that dictionary consultation has taken on a secondary role in the ESL classroom. Furthermore, many teachers view dictionary consultation as an ineffective tool for language learning.

Vocabulary development must have a meaningful application for the learner. Ediger (1999) stated that vocabulary development emphasizes that pupils seek purpose in learning. Purposeful learning in vocabulary development means that pupils perceive reasons for achieving. If the vocabulary taught has no relevance to the learner, then the chances of it being retained are slim.

Most English language dominant students have built strong, solid vocabularies in their native language over many years. But for the ESL student, vocabulary development takes on a special meaning (Gonzalez, 1999). Rupley, Logan, and Nichols (1998) expounded on the importance of vocabulary development as a critical aspect of successful reading, explaining how reading instruction that focuses on the

growth of children's vocabulary results in enhancing their abilities to infer meanings and to better comprehend what they mean. As noted by Dancman (cited in Rupley, Logan, and Nichols, 1998), vocabulary is partially an outcome of comprehension skills, and reading comprehension is partially an outcome of vocabulary. If vocabulary development is of such importance for a native speaker, it holds an even greater importance for a second language learner. We will begin to investigate this issue in chapter 2.

# CHAPTER 2

# PROBLEM DOCUMENTATION

## Problem Evidence

In order to document the extent of low reading skills of ESL students within the target district, a compilation of NCE (Normal Curve Equivalent) scores from the STAR Computer Adaptive Reading Test was used. The STAR Computer Adaptive Reading Test is a computerized reading assessment that has been validated with a nationally representative sample of more than 60,000 student tests. Students were administered the STAR Reading Test in the Spring of 2002. NCE scores of LEP (Limited English Proficient) students were compared to the NCE scores of nonLEP students. LEP students are ESL students whose overall measure of cognitive academic language proficiency in English is below that of the average English-speaking individual at the same age. Random samplings were used for both groups. The scores of students who exited the target class (ASCEND) during the period from 2000-2002 are listed separately. The results for grades 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7 are presented in the tables below. Each table is followed with a discussion of the results.

**Table 1**

***Grade 3 STAR Reading Data- Spring 2002***

| NCE ranges | exited ASCEND students (total=4) | LEP students from random sample (total=38) | nonLEP students from random sample(total=53) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1-25<br>Students scoring below chance | 50% | 21% | 9% |
| 26-39<br>Students scoring below average norm | 50% | 45% | 15% |
| 40-55<br>Students scoring at average performance as compared to normed population | 0% | 26% | 30% |
| 56-75<br>Students scoring above the average mid-range | 0% | 8% | 34% |
| 76-99<br>Students scoring well above average | 0% | 0% | 12% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% |

Table 1 indicates that all of the students in grade 3 who exited the ASCEND class scored below mid-range, however this was the only grade level surveyed in which exited ASCEND students scored in the 26-39 NCE range. More LEP students scored in the 26-39 range than at any other grade level. "NonLEP students" was the only group to have students score in the 76-99 NCE range. Forty-six percent of nonLEP students scored above mid-range while only 8% of LEP students attained the same level.

**Table 2**

***Grade 4 STAR Reading Data- Spring 2002***

| NCE ranges | exited ASCEND students (total=6) | LEP students from random sample (total=82) | nonLEP students from random sample (total=53) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1-25<br>Students scoring below chance | 100% | 28% | 4% |
| 26-39<br>Students scoring below average norm | 0% | 38% | 25% |
| 40-55<br>Students scoring at average performance as compared to normed population | 0% | 32% | 28% |
| 56-75<br>Students scoring above the average mid-range | 0% | 2% | 28% |
| 76-99<br>Students scoring well above average | 0% | 0% | 15% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% |



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What is interesting in Table 2 is that the distribution for LEP students in grade 4 was very similar to grade 3, with 70% of LEP students scoring between 26-55. Scores for exited ASCEND students were lower than in grade 3, with 100% scoring in the 1-25 NCE range. Though percentages for each NCE range in grade 4 were slightly different for the nonLEP students in grade 3, the variance was minimal.

**Table 3**

***Grade 5 STAR Reading Data- Spring 2002***

| NCE ranges | exited ASCEND students (total=9) | LEP students from random sample (total=68) | nonLEP students from random sample (total=57) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1-25<br>Students scoring below chance | 100% | 29% | 7% |
| 26-39<br>Students scoring below average norm | 0% | 31% | 19% |
| 40-55<br>Students scoring at average performance as compared to normed population | 0% | 34% | 46% |
| 56-75<br>Students scoring above the average mid-range | 0% | 6% | 12% |
| 76-99<br>Students scoring well above average | 0% | 0% | 16% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% |

As was the case in grade four, 5th grade students who exited ASCEND scored in the 1-25 NCE range. Scores for nonLEP students in grade 5 were higher than the other two groups, with 16% of the nonLEP students scoring in the 76-99 range. However, a significant drop in the percent of nonLEP students scoring in the 56-75 NCE range was noted.

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**Table 4**

***Grade 6 STAR Reading Data- Spring 2002***

| NCE ranges | exited ASCEND students (total=2) | LEP students from random sample (total=53) | nonLEP students from random sample (total=25) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1-25<br>Students scoring below chance | 100% | 34% | 16% |
| 26-39<br>Students scoring below average norm | 0% | 38% | 32% |
| 40-55<br>Students scoring at average performance as compared to normed population | 0% | 22% | 24% |
| 56-75<br>Students scoring above the average mid-range | 0% | 6% | 20% |
| 76-99<br>Students scoring well above average | 0% | 0% | 8% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% |

Once again in grade 6, nonLEP students were the only students to score in the 76-99 NCE range. Exited ASCEND students scored similar to previous grades. Seventy-two percent of LEP students scored below an NCE of 39, which is more than at any of the lower grades surveyed thus far.

**Table 5**

***Grade 7 STAR Reading Data- Spring 2002***

| NCE ranges | exited ASCEND students (total=4) | LEP students from random sample (total=13) | nonLEP students from random sample (total=40) |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1-25<br>Students scoring below chance | 100% | 92% | 40% |
| 26-39<br>Students scoring below average norm | 0% | 8% | 15% |
| 40-55<br>Students scoring at average performance as compared to normed population | 0% | 0% | 33% |
| 56-75<br>Students scoring above the average mid-range | 0% | 0% | 5% |
| 76-99<br>Students scoring well above average | 0% | 0% | 7% |
| Total | 100% | 100% | 100% |



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In general, scores for nonLEP and LEP students at grade 7 were lower than at any other grade level. Ninety-two percent of LEP students scored in the 1-25 NCE range, which is more than double the amount at any other grade. Unlike other grades, there were no LEP students who scored above the NCE of 39. Forty percent of the nonLEP students scored in the 1-25 NCE range, which is also more than double the amount found at any other grade level. No unusual changes were noted for the exited ASCEND students.

As is evidenced by the data in tables 1 through 5, the reading performance of LEP students is below that of their nonLEP peers. Ninety-two percent of students who exited the target class over the previous year scored below an NCE of 26. It should be noted, however, that these are the students who have spent very little time in the United States. Nonetheless, the need for an intervention focusing on the reading skills of ESL students is clearly demonstrated.

## Probable Causes

When examining reasons why ESL students' reading ability is lower than that of their nonESL peers, various factors began to surface. Through initial interviews with parents of immigrant students upon entrance to the target district, three recurring factors were noted. First, many students had an inconsistent, or nonexistent, education in their native language. These students lacked a sound foundation in their native language upon which they could begin to build proficiency in English. Second, many students had spent their entire life in a small village and therefore had limited life experiences. The combination of limited life experiences and an inconsistent education in their native language account for the limited prior knowledge these students bring to the classroom.

Third, the majority of ESL students had a poor English vocabulary, as evidenced by low scores on the picture vocabulary section of the Woodcock-Muñoz Language Survey. This is not unexpected since many of these students have been in the United States for a short amount of time. Nonetheless, poor English vocabulary contributes to low reading ability.

As I examined professional literature related to low reading ability of ESL students, I was able to find several underlying causes. The first probable cause I discovered was limited prior knowledge, sometimes referred to as background knowledge. Insufficient or inaccurate background knowledge may cause readers to make inferences or interpretations that are inconsistent with information in the text (Kang & Gillotte, 1995). This is an important factor in determining reading success. Brooks, Hamann, and Vetter (1997) found that students with poor reading comprehension have limited experiences and limited prior knowledge, resulting in inadequate language and vocabulary development. The importance of prior knowledge is evident by its inclusion in recommended instructional approaches. Hiebert (1991) wrote that constructivist theorists, sociocognitive researchers, and experts on language minority education generally agree that any approach that builds on a student's prior knowledge, including home language and culture, is better than instruction that fails to recognize it (Quezada, Wiley, & Ramirez, 2000). Students lacking prior knowledge and life experiences are at a distinct disadvantage when they enter the classroom.

Closely related to limited prior knowledge is a nonexistent, or inconsistent, education in the native language. Dwyer, Merriman, and Mitts (1997) attributed poor reading skills to a lack of exposure to print. English-language learning is enhanced when students

are encouraged to use skills and strategies they have in their first language (Jimenez, 1997; Perez, 1998; Roberts, 1994). Much of the knowledge students have about the processes of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in their native languages can and will transfer to English, making the task of learning English that much easier (Watts-Taffe & Truscott, 2000). A student who has had a poor education in his native language will have a harder time developing English skills, such as reading, because there is no transfer from the native language. As far back as 1979, Cummins (1979) referred to the importance of a native language education in his developmental interdependence hypothesis, which states that the development of second-language competence is partially a function of the competence already developed in the native language at the time when intensive exposure to the second language begins.

The third underlying cause for low reading ability of ESL students evident from the professional literature focused on poor vocabulary development. Mosher (1999) found that students with poor reading comprehension lack exposure and knowledge of vocabulary, and also lack strategies to learn new words. For many LEP students, limited English vocabulary slows down their speed of word recognition. This prevents them from reading fluently and enjoying these experiences (Li & Nes, 2001). Until the mid-1980's, vocabulary was considered to be a "neglected aspect" and the "poor relation" of second language teaching and learning (Maiguashca, 1993), but the 1990's offered a remarkably different picture. Vocabulary is once again a "current word" in language pedagogy, and, judging by the number of publications, it seems that research in the field is expanding by the minute (Kojic-Sabo & Lightbown, 1999). Students who lack a solid vocabulary are destined to struggle when attempting to gain meaning from

text. Because vocabulary is linked to the way information is stored in memory, and because it is the means by which students express their thinking, vocabulary development is crucial for helping second-language learners interact with the text (Watts-Taffe & Truscott, 2000).

In summary, a review of the professional literature suggests three major probable causes for low reading ability among ESL students; limited prior knowledge (and life experiences), nonexistent or inconsistent education in native language, and poor vocabulary development. These three factors contribute to low self-confidence in the classroom, which in and of itself impairs a student's progress in acquiring reading skills.

# CHAPTER 3

# THE SOLUTION STRATEGY

## Literature Review

A review of the professional literature, as suggested by the contextual and probable cause data, revealed various solution strategies. Three strategies rang dominate over all others; cooperative learning, primary language support, and vocabulary development. I will concentrate on these three strategies.

Cooperative learning strategies take many forms. Cooperative learning strategies help promote English acquisition as well as the development of needed literacy skills. These approaches go beyond the traditional methods and are designed to capitalize on the strengths of each individual. Cooperative learning has produced favorable results for ESL students (Duran & Szymanski, 1995; Jacob, Rottenberg, Patrick, & Wheeler, 1996). Cooperative strategies provide students with the opportunity to learn alongside native English speakers. Paired reading, a cooperative strategy whereby a student reads aloud in tandem with an accomplished reader, offers ESL students a number of advantages over traditional instruction. Li and Nes (2001) listed three advantages of paired reading. First, paired reading reduces students' pressure and anxiety. Second, paired reading gives students more opportunity to practice reading in a new language. Third, paired reading is flexible and easy to make adaptations.

Peer-tutoring allows ESL students to participate in regular classroom activities with the support of a native English speaker. Gersten and Baker (2000) believe cooperative learning and peer-tutoring strategies have the potential to effectively and rapidly increase English-language development, particularly decontextualized language concepts with high degrees of cognitive challenge. Greenwood, Arreaga-Mayer, and Utley (2001) investigated the effect of CWPT (classwide peer tutoring) on second-language acquisition and literacy for elementary level English language learners. Classwide peer tutoring is a form of intraclass, same-age, reciprocal peer tutoring. The results indicated that students achieved and sustained a pattern of mastering new English sight vocabulary and spelling words through the use of CWPT. Equally impressive were the positive findings yielded from a study that examined the reading comprehension, content learning, and vocabulary acquisition of 10 and 11 year old bilingual English language learners when utilizing a cooperative learning strategy, called Collaborative Strategic Reading, in their Science class (Klingner, 1997; Klingner & Vaughn, 1998). CSR (Collaborative Strategic Reading) combines reading comprehension strategies and cooperative learning. CSR has consistently produced positive findings in investigations of its effectiveness (Klingner & Vaughn, 1999).

Schultz (2000) investigated the effectiveness of a cooperative learning strategy with an ethnically diverse population in a rural setting and found that students working in groups outperformed those working individually on tests measuring both declarative and procedural knowledge. The ability to comprehend what one has read involves many nonverbal thought processes as well as verbal. Samaha and De Lisi (2000) conducted a study that investigated the effects of a cooperative learning strategy, peer

collaboration, on a nonverbal reasoning task. Subjects consisted of educationally disadvantaged seventh graders who were primarily minority students (Hispanic) and who qualified for free or reduced lunches. Samaha and De Lisi concluded that participation in the collaborative reasoning activity increased the quality of the students' explanations, making them better able to understand the items and effectively explain the reasoning behind their answers. Cooperative learning strategies, then, may provide one possible solution to the problem of low reading skills in ESL students.

The use of primary language support, sometimes referred to as native language support, is a strategy widely recommended in the professional literature. Use of the primary language can come in many forms, from direct instruction in the native language to translation of worksheets. Pucci (2001) stated that children learn and retain more vocabulary from listening to stories when the teacher uses a methodology that builds background knowledge by employing the primary language in a scaffolding type activity. She concluded that primary language support assists the student in acquiring second language vocabulary, specifically when there is no direct translation into the primary language. Cook (2001) argued that exclusive use of the target language in second language teaching is not theoretically justified and does not lead to maximum language learning. He suggested that teachers maximize their target language use, without avoiding the primary language at all costs. Turnbull (2001) also agreed that there is indeed a place for the teacher to use the students' primary language in second language teaching. Stern (1992) suggested that use of primary language and target language should be seen as complimentary, depending on the characteristics and stages of the language learning processes. Of course, the use of primary language

support presumes some knowledge of that particular language by the instructor. Therefore, this can be one stumbling block when investigating the potential of primary language support. At times it can be difficult to find qualified bilingual personnel.

The use of primary language is also a controversial issue (Gersten & Baker, 2000). Research opposing, as well as supporting, the use of native language strategies was prevalent in the literature (Krashen, 1999; Baker, 1999). The amount, and specific use, of the primary language is what is commonly debated. Gersten and Baker (2000) concluded, after investigating the available research, that it is beneficial to use students' native language, but it should be done strategically, and, in general, the tendency to provide dual translations should be resisted.

The third solution strategy, vocabulary development, was referred to in numerous professional articles. Mastering English vocabulary is crucial for ESL students to become language competent, especially in their classroom settings (Avila & Sadoski, 1996). Unfortunately, it was not until recently that many professionals in the fields of English as a Second/Foreign Language began to realize that vocabulary acquisition is important in English reading processes (Caody, 1993). In an integrative review of 67 sample research reports on English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) learners' cognitive reading processes, Fitzgerald (1995) suggested that experiences and prior knowledge affected comprehension and recall, and that vocabulary knowledge, typically, may be a highly significant variable in United States ESL learners' success. Fitzgerald also determined that more proficient ESL readers made better use of vocabulary knowledge than did less proficient ESL readers.

Gersten and Baker (2000) investigated the knowledge base of effective instruction for ESL learners by interviewing professional educators in a series of five work groups. One clear point of agreement among the professional work groups was that vocabulary learning plays a major role in successful programs for English-language learners. There are numerous opportunities for students to engage in vocabulary development. Ediger (1999) believed that the teacher needs to establish objectives, learning opportunities, and evaluation procedures within individual academic areas to guide pupils in acquiring a rich listening, speaking, reading, and writing vocabulary. However, the vocabulary must be meaningful and purposeful for the students. The mainstream curriculum focuses on content and rarely considers that some students may be struggling with vocabulary and language at the same time they are trying to grasp concepts. Cornell (1995) pointed out that many ESL students may not have the experience, or knowledge, needed to understand a topic. However, a preliminary discussion can supply the critical vocabulary required. Rupley, Logan, and Nichols (1998) assert that vocabulary instruction is an integral component of teaching children how to read both narrative and informational text. Children with broad vocabulary knowledge are better able to infer the meanings of unfamiliar words in the texts that they read.

After considering the problem context and the probable causes of the problem, I have decided to implement an intensive vocabulary-building strategy as a solution to improving the reading skills of the ESL students in the target class. Primary language support and cooperative strategies are already being employed in the target class, therefore it was a logical choice to pursue a solution which addressed vocabulary

development issues. Following are the Project Objectives and Processes, the Project Action Plan, and the Methods of Assessment.

## Project Objectives and Processes

As a result of implementing an intensive vocabulary-building program, during the period of September 2002 through December 2002, the students of the targeted ESL class will show an increase of six months in their grade equivalent reading score, as measured by the STAR Computer Adaptive Reading Test. Processes used to implement this objective include the following:

1. Employment of a computerized vocabulary-building program.
2. Incorporation of a mini picture dictionary.
3. Small group instruction with Word by Word vocabulary cards.
4. Small group instruction with Modern Curriculum Press picture vocabulary cards.
5. Use of vocabulary-based games.
6. Utilization of Rosetta Stone software.

As a result of implementing an intensive vocabulary-building program, during the period of September 2002 through December 2002, the students of the targeted ESL class will demonstrate an increase in self-confidence, as documented through teacher observation of classroom participation. Processes used to implement this objective include the following:

1. Employment of a computerized vocabulary-building program.
2. Incorporation of a mini picture dictionary.
3. Small group instruction with Word by Word vocabulary cards.
4. Small group instruction with Modern Curriculum Press picture vocabulary cards.

5. Use of vocabulary-based games.
6. Utilization of Rosetta Stone software.

## Methods of Assessment

In order to determine the effect of the intervention, various assessment instruments will be utilized. Reading aptitude will be assessed using the STAR Computer Adaptive Reading Test, employing a pre and posttest model. Self-confidence will be assessed using a Classroom Participation Checklist, also adhering to a pre and posttest model. Though not an objective of this project, vocabulary growth will be assessed using the picture vocabulary scores from the Woodcock-Muñoz Language Survey. A pre and posttest will be administered at the beginning and end of the research period, respectively.

## Project Action Plan

The Project Action Plan for this research project has been developed as a chart. It follows on the next page. The chart shows the strategies that will be employed, when and why these strategies will occur.

| WHEN | STRATEGY | PARTICIPANTS | WHY |
|---|---|---|---|
| Week 1 | • Administer Woodcock-Munoz Language Survey<br>• Administer STAR Computer Adaptive Reading Test<br>• Implement computerized vocabulary-building program- 3x/week (ongoing)<br>• Implement use of class participation checklist<br>• Begin use of mini picture dictionaries- as needed (ongoing) | Students in target class | • To establish baseline vocabulary "pretest" score<br>• To measure reading pre-test level<br>• To increase vocabulary picture recognition<br>• To establish "before" measure of class participation<br>• To provide a basic set of 135 vocabulary words |
| Week 2 | • Implement small group vocabulary instruction with Modern Curriculum Press picture vocabulary cards- 3x/week (ongoing)<br>• Continue use of class participation checklist | Students in target class | • To increase vocabulary related to phonics workbook<br>• To establish "before" measure of class participation |
| Week 3 | • Begin vocabulary based game- weekly (ongoing)<br>• Implement the use of Rosetta Stone software- weekly (ongoing) | Students in target class | • To reinforce acquired vocabulary<br>• Increase vocabulary related to nouns, prepositions, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs |
| Week 4 | • Implement small group vocabulary instruction with Word by Word Game Cards- 3x/week (ongoing) | Students in target class | • To reinforce acquired vocabulary and introduce new vocabulary related to food, clothing, and emotions |
| Weeks 5 - 14 | Continue with following ongoing strategies:<br>• Computerized vocabulary-building program- 3x/week<br>• Use of mini picture dictionaries- as needed<br>• Small group vocabulary instruction with Modern Curriculum Press picture vocabulary cards- 3x/week<br>• Vocabulary based game- weekly<br>• Use of Rosetta Stone software- weekly<br>• Small group vocabulary instruction with Word by Word Game Cards- 3x/week | Students in target class | • To increase vocabulary picture recognition<br>• To provide a basic set of 135 vocabulary words<br>• To increase vocabulary related to phonics workbook<br>• To reinforce acquired vocabulary<br>• Increase vocabulary related to nouns, prepositions, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs<br>• To reinforce acquired vocabulary and introduce new vocabulary related to food, clothing, and emotions |
| Week 14 | • Implement use of class participation checklist | Students in target class | • To establish "after" measure of class participation |
| Week 15 | • Administer STAR Computer Adaptive Reading Test<br>• Administer picture vocabulary of Woodcock-Munoz Language Survey<br>• Continue use of class participation checklist | Students in target class | • To measure reading post-test level<br>• To establish vocabulary "posttest" score<br>• To establish "after" measure of class participation |



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# CHAPTER 4

# PROJECT RESULTS

## Historical Description of the Intervention

The objective of this project was to increase the reading scores, and consequently self-confidence, of students in the target class. The implementation of an intensive vocabulary-building program was selected to achieve the desired changes.

The intensive vocabulary-building program, employed as an instructional intervention, operated for 14 weeks. The program consisted of six integrated, strategies. A fundamental aspect of the program was the integration of the six strategies, providing repeated exposure to the vocabulary. Strategies were introduced at different times in the program, though all strategies ran from their time of introduction through week 14.

In week one, two strategies were introduced. The first strategy consisted of a computerized vocabulary exercise that was employed for forty minutes on Monday, Tuesday, and Friday. The exercise was comprised of 95 vocabulary words recorded on compact disc (CD), accompanied by pictures. The vocabulary words were divided into three sets of 20 and one set of 35. Students practiced reciting the words, along with the CD, while viewing the corresponding picture. Students moved from one station to the

next. When a student memorized all the names for the pictures in a particular set, the student no longer practiced that set. This helped to alleviate concerns on the part of the teacher/researcher that students would become bored with the vocabulary and consequently lose concentration. The second strategy involved the introduction of two mini picture dictionaries that contained many of the words used in the computerized vocabulary exercise. This repeated exposure was designed to help students internalize the vocabulary. Students were able to utilize these mini picture dictionaries whenever needed, such as during creative writing.

A third strategy was introduced in week two of the project. Students began participating in small group vocabulary instruction with Modern Curriculum Press picture vocabulary cards. Group sessions were held on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Each session lasted for approximately 10-12 minutes. The Modern Curriculum Press picture vocabulary cards corresponded with pictures in a phonics workbook utilized by the students. These vocabulary cards focused on basic nouns, such as box, mitt, rat, map, etc. The cards were utilized in a "flash card" format.

In week three, two additional strategies were introduced. The first strategy consisted of students participating in a vocabulary-based bingo game every Thursday. The bingo game was designed to reinforce previously introduced vocabulary. Each bingo card contained 25 pictures of vocabulary previously introduced by the computerized vocabulary exercise. Each game session lasted approximately 25 minutes. The second strategy consisted of students utilizing the Rosetta Stone software program every Wednesday for 40 minutes. Rosetta Stone is a software program designed to teach a foreign language, in this case English, to students by mimicking the way native

speakers learn their native language. Rosetta Stone's method uses thousands of real-life images, written text, and voices of native speakers to teach students like a native learner. Each lesson taps the intuitive ability to connect words and meanings.

The last intervention strategy was introduced in week four. Students participated in small group practice sessions utilizing Word by Word Game Cards. These vocabulary cards differed form the Modern Curriculum Press picture vocabulary cards in that these cards went beyond basic vocabulary. The Word by Word cards provided vocabulary practice in such areas as emotions, clothing, and food. The cards were employed as flash cards. Sessions were approximately ten minutes in duration and were held on Monday, Thursday, and Friday.

In weeks five through fourteen, the strategies were implemented in the following manner. On Mondays, the students utilized the computerized vocabulary exercise, participated in the Modern Curriculum Press vocabulary card session, and participated in the Word by Word game card session. On Tuesdays, the students utilized the computerized vocabulary exercise. On Wednesdays, the students worked with the Rosetta Stone software program and participated in the Modern Curriculum Press vocabulary card session. On Thursdays, the students participated in the Word by Word game card session and engaged in a vocabulary-based bingo game. On Fridays, the students utilized the computerized vocabulary exercise, participated in the Modern Curriculum Press vocabulary card session, and participated in the Word by Word game card session. During weeks five through fourteen, students were able to use the mini picture dictionaries whenever needed.

In week fourteen, the instructor began implementation of the class participation checklist (Appendix A). In week fifteen, all strategies were halted. The instructor concluded implementation of the class participation checklist and the students were administered the STAR Computer Adaptive Reading Test.

## Presentation and Analysis of Results

In order to assess the effect of the intensive vocabulary-building program on student reading scores, the STAR Computer Adaptive Reading Test was administered to the students following a pre and posttest model. The STAR Computer Adaptive Reading Test is a reading assessment that uses in-context vocabulary questions, plus authentic text passages, to determine a precise measure of a student's reading performance. STAR Reading has been validated with a nationally representative sample of more than 60,000 student tests. It was administered to all targeted students during the first week of the project, and again during week 15. The pre and posttest data are presented in Table 6.

**Table 6**

***STAR Reading scores using Grade Equivalents Results***

| Student | Pre-intervention Score | Post-intervention Score | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 0.0 | 1.7 | 1.7 |
| 2 | 0.0 | 1.3 | 1.3 |
| 3 | n/a | n/a | n/a |
| 4 | n/a | n/a | n/a |
| 5 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| 6 | 0.6 | 1.1 | 0.5 |
| 7 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| 8 | 0.4 | 2.0 | 1.6 |
| 9 | 0.0 | 1.1 | 1.1 |
| 10 | 0.9 | 1.2 | 0.3 |
| 11 | 0.0 | 0.0 | 0.0 |
| 12 | 0.9 | 1.4 | 0.5 |
| 13 | 0.0 | 0.9 | 0.9 |
| 14 | 0.0 | 1.1 | 1.1 |
| 15 | 0.9 | 1.5 | 0.6 |
| 16 | 1.2 | 1.8 | 0.6 |
| 17 | 0.0 | 1.2 | 1.2 |
| 18 | 0.0 | 0.9 | 0.9 |
| 19 | 0.0 | 0.9 | 0.9 |
| mean | 0.3 | 1.1 | 0.8 |

Note. Figures are represented in *grade.month* format (e.g. 0.9 = ninth month of kindergarten) and are rounded to the nearest tenth.

The intervention appears to have had a positive effect on the students' reading scores. The class mean increased from a grade equivalent of third month in kindergarten (0.3) to a grade equivalent of first month in first grade (1.1), a difference of approximately 8 months (.8). A standard grade equivalent increase of three months (0.3) would have been expected without the intervention, since the duration of the project implementation period was three months, allowing for nonattendance days.

Thirteen of the seventeen students had grade equivalent increases greater than the expected three months, one student had an increase of three months, and three students showed no increase.

Scores of "0.0" translate into non-readers, meaning such students were not able to read at a kindergarten level. Of particular interest is the fact that the greatest increases seemed to come from those students who were initially non-readers. The increases for students with a pretest score above 0.0 were generally less than those who scored 0.0. The mean increase for the eleven students who had a pretest score of 0.0 was 0.8, while the mean increase for the six students who had a pretest score greater than 0.0 was 0.7. Students #3 and #4 transferred out of the class during the project and therefore were not included in the final results.

In order to assess the effect of the intensive vocabulary-building program on the self-confidence of students, classroom participation was observed and documented on a checklist. The purpose of the checklist was to assess the degree of participation in the classroom. One would expect a student with high self-confidence to participate more than a student with low self-confidence. A Classroom Participation Checklist template can be found in Appendix A.

The students were observed three days during the first two weeks and three days during the last two weeks of the project, adhering to a pre and post-assessment model. In week one, students were observed on Tuesday and Friday. In week two, students were observed on Tuesday. In week fourteen, students were observed on Tuesday and Friday. In week fifteen, students were observed on Thursday.

The original intent of the researcher was to use four categories on the checklist to assess classroom participation. However, after implementing the classroom participation checklist at the beginning and end of the project, the researcher found that some of the categories were either redundant or did not accurately assess the target behavior. The "raises hand" category was originally included to assess the degree to which a student participated in whole class discussions. In order to address the students who would simply call out an answer without raising their hands, the "participates in whole class discussions" category was added. Upon reflection, these two categories were, in many instances, assessing the same behavior. For example, if a student raises his/her hand during a classroom discussion, then that student is also participating in the whole class discussion. The behavior of "participating" was being assessed twice. In actuality, there was no need for the "raises hand" category since the degree of participation in whole class discussions was accurately assessed in the "participates in whole class discussions" category for students who raised their hands as well as for students who called out an answer. Therefore, the "raises hand category" was eliminated.

The researcher also determined that the "asks for help" category did not accurately assess the degree of participation in the classroom. An advanced student might never need help and therefore would not ask for it. That student would receive a low score in the "asks for help" category, implying that his/her degree of participation is low. This is not assessing the student's degree of participation in the classroom, but rather the student's understanding of the material. As a result, the "asks for help" category was also removed from the checklist. The two remaining categories that were used in the

classroom participation checklist were the "participates in whole class discussions" and "participates in small group discussions." The data is presented in Table 7.

**Table 7**

***Classroom Participation Checklist Results***

| Student | Pre-Intervention Average | Post-Intervention Average | Difference |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 1.2 | 3.0 | 1.8 |
| 2 | 1.2 | 3.0 | 1.8 |
| 3 | n/a | n/a | n/a |
| 4 | n/a | n/a | n/a |
| 5 | 1.2 | 2.0 | 0.8 |
| 6 | 3.0 | 3.0 | 0.0 |
| 7 | 1.0 | 2.0 | 1.0 |
| 8 | 3.0 | 3.0 | 0.0 |
| 9 | 1.5 | 2.5 | 1.0 |
| 10 | 2.5 | 3.0 | 0.5 |
| 11 | 1.0 | 1.5 | 0.5 |
| 12 | 2.7 | 3.0 | 0.3 |
| 13 | 1.7 | 3.0 | 1.3 |
| 14 | 1.7 | 2.5 | 0.8 |
| 15 | 1.0 | 2.0 | 1.0 |
| 16 | 2.7 | 3.0 | 0.3 |
| 17 | 1.5 | 3.0 | 1.5 |
| 18 | 1.0 | 2.0 | 1.0 |
| 19 | 1.0 | 2.5 | 1.5 |
| mean | 1.7 | 2.6 | 0.9 |

Note. 1= never participates, 2= sometimes participates, 3= frequently participates
Numbers are rounded to the nearest tenth.

For the purpose of rating students related to their participation, whether in a whole class or a small group discussion, the following procedure was used for each individual observation session. If a student never participated, a "1" (never participates) was assigned. If a student participated one or two times, a "2" (sometimes participates) was

assigned. If a student participated three or more times, a "3" (frequently participates) was assigned. Students were never prompted to participate.

The intervention appears to have had a positive effect on the participation of the targeted students. For the purpose of this project, an increase in classroom participation is equated with an increase in self-confidence. The only students who did not show an increase in their degree of classroom participation were those students who had the highest possible score at the onset of the intervention. If these scores are disaggregated, the mean difference increases from 0.9 to 1.0.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the presentation and analysis of the data on reading scores, the students showed improvement in reading ability. Vocabulary acquired through the intensive vocabulary-building program appears to have substantially increased students' reading ability. The project objective related to reading scores predicted that the students' grade equivalent reading scores would increase by six months, as a result of the intervention. The mean increase for the targeted class was 8 months. While some students had no increase at all, 76% showed an increase beyond what would have been expected if no intervention were applied. The greatest increases came from those students who scored lowest on the pretest. The mean increase for the eleven students who scored 0.0 on the pretest was 8.3 months. The mean increase for the six students who scored above 0.0 on the pretest was 6.8 months.

Based on the presentation and analysis of the data on classroom participation, the students showed an increase in self-confidence. Nine students showed an increase in classroom participation of one point or greater on the rating scale. There were no

students who failed to increase their classroom participation, except for those students who had the highest possible score at the onset of the intervention, as previously discussed. The mean increase for the class was 0.9, almost a full rating point.

The manner chosen for measuring self-confidence relied on the assumption that the more knowledgeable a student is, the greater their self-confidence. This self-confidence would be then manifested through a high degree of participation in whole class and/or small group discussions, which would be measurable. It should be noted, however, that exceptions do exist. Some students may have a high degree of participation even though they are not knowledgeable on the subject being discussed. Other students may be quite knowledgeable, but do not participate. In both these cases, personality type may be the driving force rather than degree of knowledge. Such case scenarios would skew the data. A more objective and reliable method of assessing self-confidence in level one ESL students would be a worthy goal for future researchers.

While reflecting upon the merits of this action research project, this researcher has determined that while a direct correlation between vocabulary acquisition, self-confidence, and reading ability cannot be made from this project, a connection has surfaced which warrants further study. The importance of vocabulary knowledge in reading ability for ESL students is undeniable; the extent of the involvement needs additional investigation. The intervention appears to have been successful, however, there were too many uncontrolled variables in this project to draw scientific conclusions related to the project objectives. It is the opinion of this researcher that future research dedicated to studying the impact of vocabulary development on reading ability in ESL students should employ the scientific method, with an attempt being made to assess the

degree to which vocabulary development affects reading ability. Two diverse forms of reading assessment are recommended to assess reading ability, utilizing a pre and posttest model for both. For example, an assessment utilizing cloze passages and an assessment employing short stories with comprehension questions could be used. Some students may fare better with one particular format than another. Limiting the assessment to only one specific format puts some students at a disadvantage and may distort the data. Furthermore, attempting to accurately measure self-confidence and establish a correlation with vocabulary development is a daunting task. A great deal of time and effort was dedicated to that end in this research project, with no concrete conclusions being drawn. Therefore, such an undertaking would be best served as a separate action research project.

This researcher concludes that vocabulary plays an important role in the reading ability of ESL students. It not only increases their reading comprehension, but also opens up a world into which access was previously denied. These students can then better participate in the world around them, rather than sit idly on the sidelines. This is the key to making them feel better about themselves.

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Appendices

## Appendix A
## Classroom Participation Checklist

Teacher _____ Class _____

Dates: Day 1 _____ Day 2 _____ Day 3 _____

Target Skills degree of participation

Ratings:
3 = Frequently (3+)
2 = Sometimes (1-2)
1 = Never (0)

☐ Teacher ☐ Peer ☐ Self

| | Name | Day 1 | | | | | Day 2 | | | | | Day 3 | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Raises hand | Asks for help | Participates in whole class discussions | Participates in small group discussions | Other: | *Raises hand* | *Asks for help* | *Participates in whole class discussions* | *Participates in small group discussions* | *Other:* | **Raises hand** | **Asks for help** | **Participates in whole class discussions** | **Participates in small group discussions** | **Other:** |
| 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
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